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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 001612

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SUBJECT: WILL VOTE FOR FOOD- REPORTED POLITICIZATION OF
DONOR RESOURCES AS ELECTIONS APPROACH

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) A four day trip to the Southern Nations and Nationalities (SNNPR) and Oromiya regions shed light on the possible politicization of donor cash and food resources delivered through the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP), coercive recruitment tactics by the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), opposition party apprehension about participation in the upcoming 2010 national elections, and renewed ethnic conflict over regional boundaries. While concerns about the politicization of the PSNP -- and distribution of other public services -- have been raised before, the upcoming elections are likely to intensify the pervasiveness of coercive recruitment tactics, including the withholding of food aid, seeds, and fertilizer from poor farmers. Opposition parties expressed that they will only participate in the upcoming elections if there is a significant opening of political space. While the government may allow opposition parties to campaign a few months before the election, underlying factors including coercion/manipulation of voters, the partiality of the National Electoral Board (NEB), and the vast disparity of resources between the ruling and opposition parties have resulted in a political playing field strongly tilted in favor of the ruling party. End Summary.

Politicization of Humanitarian Assistance

¶2. (C) Several opposition party representatives in the towns of Hosaena, Durame, Shone, and Awassa reported that cash and food distributions under the PSNP are being used as a political tool by the EPRDF. Representatives from all towns consistently told PolOffs that local administrators who manage the PSNP force farmers to register as EPRDF members in order to receive PSNP benefits - six months of predictable transfers of cash or food in payment of public works activities. Microfinance loans have also reportedly been linked to EPRDF membership. Opposition United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) representatives in Shone said that local officials issue loans to farmers at a high interest rate and collect the farmer's PSNP allotments as loan payments. An employee of the Ministry of Agriculture in Awassa (also a member of UEDF) said that the government is using PSNP money to recruit local EPRDF cadres by adding them to the list of PSNP beneficiaries. UEDF member Samuel Siedo in Shone town told PolOffs that he, along with Dawit Dedebo, and Matheos Cambore, were cut off from PSNP support and told they must join the EPRDF to be re-instated in the program. He complained to the regional administration, who also told

him he must join the EPRDF to receive assistance. Local officials reportedly told him, "Why don't you go to Beyene Petros (leader of UEDF party) for money?" Currently, USAID is not supporting any PSNP activities in the SNNP region where the alleged manipulation took place. Additionally, USG resources are less likely than other donors' resources to be manipulated in the PSNP since USAID implementing partners have a higher level of accountability than the pooled donor funds, which are administered through regional and local governments.

13. (SBU) According to several opposition party members, the EPRDF uses a variety of recruitment tactics. Civil servants who register as EPRDF members reportedly receive preferential treatment in job assignment, promotion, and professional development opportunities. Interlocuteurs complained that the government's Business Process Re-Engineering (BPR) initiative is being used to rid the civil service of opposition party members. Poor farmers rely on the government for subsidized seeds and fertilizers, food assistance, and tax reductions, and these benefits are being linked to EPRDF membership, with refusal to join the party prompting a denial of further access to services or agricultural inputs. Students reported that they are more likely to be assigned by the government to the university of their choice if they are a registered EPRDF member. (NOTE: University students reported that there was almost no political dialogue happening at the university due to fear of retaliation. END NOTE). A female All Ethiopia Unity Party (AEUP) member reported that government women's associations are also politicized, with EPRDF members benefiting

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disproportionately.

14. (C) Many expressed frustration with the U.S. Government for the "perpetuation of a dictatorship" by allowing the EPRDF to use foreign aid to strengthen the party. USAID implementing partner GOAL representatives who have worked extensively in the Oromiya and SNNPR regions said that food insecurity there is chronic, and they feel that the Ethiopian government urgently needs to address long-term food security.

The GOAL representatives said that there are increasing signs that food aid is creating dependency and decreasing coping mechanisms.

Will Opposition Parties Participate in Elections?

15. (SBU) Opposition party members expressed apprehension about participating in the upcoming 2010 national elections. During the 2008 local elections they were subject to severe harassment, and because that election was a sweeping victory for the EPRDF, some feel that the struggle was in vain. Local party representatives said there is a possibility that they will not participate in the elections if there is not significant opening of political space. Opposition party members expressed little confidence in the local NEB representatives and domestic observation groups, as they consider them loyal to the ruling party. Opposition representatives are confident that they have significant support in rural areas, despite the EPRDF's tactics to lure supporters away. While most opposition parties with whom we met had offices, representatives reported that members are afraid to come to the office for fear of losing government benefits. Some opposition party leaders informed us that they have adopted a tactic of encouraging their supporters to join the ruling party and accept all benefits provided in response, but to still vote with their conscience on election day.

Renewed Conflict

16. (SBU) PolOffs were unable to visit the Boricha Stabilization Center after local authorities warned that the

situation was unstable due to renewed violence over regional boundaries. Scarcity of resources is creating tension among ethnic groups who have lived together peacefully for decades.

In West Hararge, in a meeting with GOAL representatives, local officials expressed fear that violence would soon break out because relief aid will be discontinued due to a shortage of food.

Comment

¶7. (C) With national elections less than a year away, the ruling EPRDF party seems to be taking measures to further tighten its grip on power in rural areas well ahead of the elections. Using every resource available, including humanitarian assistance provided by the international community, the ruling party is creating a system to ensure that peasants must rely on it for their livelihoods, and demanding loyalty in exchange. Ethiopia may see an outward opening of political space as the election draws nearer, but one should remain cognizant of the underlying system of patronage. The U.S. Mission and allied donor partners will initiate an investigation into the allegations of diversion of PSNP resources for political purposes. Pending the findings of that investigation, the program's monitoring procedures may require re-evaluation to ensure that ours and other donors' assistance is not being used to repress politically the people we are trying to help. End Comment.
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